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Occupational Health Nurses' Credentials from Canadian Colleges, Polytechnics and Universities

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ABSTRACT

Occupational Health Nursing and Occupational Health and Safety credentials are obtained through education and examination at accredited Canadian colleges and universities while the certified occupational health nurse [COHN (C)] credential is obtained through the credentialing process of the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA). In addition, the Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP) is another health and safety certificate which is awarded by the Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals.

Problem Statement

This study reports the credentials that are obtained from accredited Canadian colleges and universities that offer education and examination in occupational health nursing and occupational health and safety.

Method

The study used a non-experimental descriptive design and data was obtained by mailed questionnaire from practicing members of a local Nurses Association (n=900).

Results

354 usable questionnaires were returned. Occupational health nurses (N=329) answered the question on credential. Of this number, 75.1% of participants indicated that they were currently credentialed in occupational health nursing. Of these 27.7% had a diploma in occupational health nursing and 47.4% held certificate. In occupational health and safety 11.9% held a certificate from a college or university, while 5.8% held the Canadian Registered Safety Professional certificate from the Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals.

Conclusion

Occupational health nurses have varied education in occupational health nursing and in occupational health and safety.

Key Words: Accredited, certificate, diploma, degree, colleges, universities, occupational health nurse, education, occupational health and safety.

BACKGROUND

In Canada all Registered Nurses have completed initial education at either a diploma or degree level. Following registration, nurses can elect to work in the specialty of occupational health nursing, delivering integrated nursing and health and safety services to individual worker and worker populations. At this time Occupational Health Nurses (OHNs) may also have a variety of additional qualifications. For instance OHNs can be certified by the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) in occupational health nursing; undertake further specialized studies in health and safety at certificate, diploma or degree level from a community college or university; obtain a certificate in case management or in disability management (COHNA 2009).

Yet, other OHNs may have a designation as a Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP) awarded by the Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals. This federal designation is awarded to professionals who have met academic requirements, work experience, and who have achieved a professional level of competence in accident prevention (Canadian Society of Safety Engineering).

In this report credential means a certificate, diploma or degree from accredited Canadian colleges, polytechnic institutions, universities or from the Board of Canadian Registered safety professionals.

A search of the websites of the Canadian accredited colleges and universities that offer education in occupational health nursing or occupational health and safety, revealed that the diploma program in occupational health nursing was replaced with the certificate program. However, the diploma is still a recognized credential in occupational health nursing. Currently national or provincial standards for occupational health nursing or occupational health and safety courses have not yet been established for colleges and universities. The Ontario Occupational

Health Nurses Association (OOHNA) recognizes this lack of standard and is actively seeking to address this issue (OOHNA 2008).

Typically the subject areas that form the content of an occupational health nursing certificate or would contribute toward competency as an OHN are: ergonomics, health promotion, health and safety legislation, environmental health, epidemiology and statistics, research methodology, patient assessment, nursing process, case management, disaster planning, health surveillance, counselling and health education, supervisory skills, and occupational health nursing (St. Lawrence College 2009; British Columbia Institute of Technology 2009; Grant MacEwan University 2009).

Information from websites of some other Canadian colleges and universities that offer occupational health and safety certificate and degree programs reveal that a bachelor of applied science degree in occupational health and safety is available (Ryerson University). Another Ontario university offers a disability management course as well as two graduate degree programs in occupational health: a doctorate (PhD) and a Master (MSc. Applied) degree in Occupational Health Sciences (McGill University). Education in disability management leading to a certificate (Mohawk College 2009; Grant MacEwan College 2009), a diploma (Dalhousie University 2009), and a Master of Arts in disability management is also available (University of Northern British Columbia, 2009).

The Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and MEDLINE databases were searched for the period 2001 to 2007 to identify previous literature on credentialing of occupational health nurses at colleges and universities. No literature was found.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the number of OHNs who hold a credential in occupational health nursing and occupational health and safety, obtained from colleges, polytechnic institutes or universities.

DESIGN

Using a non-experimental descriptive research design and convenience sampling invitations to participate and questionnaires were mailed to 900 members of the Ontario Occupational Nurses Association (OOHNA). All participants were currently working in Ontario and fluent in written English. Recruitment commenced following ethics approval. Participation in the study was voluntary and return of the completed questionnaire implied consent.

Data Collection

The self administered questionnaire was distributed by OOHNA in March and April 2008. Each participant received a single package containing an information sheet, questionnaire, and a reply paid envelope. OOHNA sent a follow up e-mail message two weeks later to encourage completion of the questionnaire. The participants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality were communicated to them in writing and the researchers did not have access to their names and addresses.

The questionnaire requested demographic information on age and gender, and specific information related to OHN such as years of experience, length of time in current job, type of industry and job responsibilities, OHN certification, OHN core credentials, and additional credentials in occupational health nursing and occupational health and safety. In addition

questions related to methods of preparation for certification, preferred delivery format of continuing education (CE), number of hours of CE taken yearly, employer support for CE, and benefits of CE.

Data Analysis

A total of 356 questionnaires were returned and then checked for completion. Blank questionnaires were discarded ($n = 2$), resulting in 354 usable questionnaires; a response rate of 39.3%. The data was coded and transferred to a Microsoft EXCEL spreadsheet. Data entry errors were minimized by using consistency checks. The data was summarized using SPSS software and displayed in tables to show frequencies and percentiles.

RESULTS

Demographic data collected from the survey showed that 97% of the sample was female, and that most (37%) worked in the Toronto region, 36% in the South West region, and 13% in the Ottawa region. For the highest level of education ($n=350$), 70% reported having a Diploma in Nursing and 27.4% a Bachelor of Science Nursing; the remaining (2.6%) held Masters in Nursing and Nurse Practitioner degrees. For the highest level of non-nursing education ($n=245$), 82% of respondents reported also holding a non-nursing Certificate or Diploma, 13.9% a baccalaureate degree, and 4.1% held masters or doctoral degrees.

Credentials

Occupational health nurses ($N=329$) answered the question on credentials. Of this number, 75.1% obtained credentials from Canadian colleges or universities, i.e. 27.7% hold an OHN Diploma and 47.4% hold an OHN Certificate, 15.8% do not have OHN education, while 9.1% had other education. In addition, some OHNs ($N=345$) had credentials in occupational health, i.e. case management certificate 2.9%, disability management certificate 5.2%,

occupational health and safety certificate 11.9%, and Canadian registered safety professional 5.8%. However, 74.2% reported having no additional credential in occupational health.

DISCUSSION

This study reports the types of credentials in occupational health nursing and occupational health and safety held by occupational health nurses who are members of OOHNA. The study also found that occupational health nurses have a variety of credentials (i.e. occupational health nursing certificate, occupational health and safety certificate, diploma, or degree, Canadian registered safety professional certificate, case management certificate, and disability management certificate) which enable them to serve individual workers and worker populations and to meet the health and environmental needs of the workplace. The case management certificate is awarded by the American Board of Occupational Health Nurses.

The courses in occupational health nursing and occupational health and safety that form the content of the program at colleges, polytechnic institutions and universities is consistent with the services and programs provided by occupational health nurses in the workplace. The Canadian Occupational Health Nurses Association (COHNA) membership survey confirmed that occupational health nurses provide disability/case management, health and safety education, environmental or compliance law, ergonomics, health promotion and infection control (COHNA membership survey 2009).

LIMITATION

The study was unable to identify the number of courses in each certificate program at the college or university. It was also unable to determine why the diploma program was discontinued.

CONCLUSION

This was the first study to investigate the occupational health nurses' credentials in occupational health nursing and occupational health and safety from colleges, polytechnic institutes and universities and from the board of Canadian registered safety professionals. The findings from the study revealed that occupational health nurses hold credentials in occupational health nursing, occupational health, including Canadian registered safety professional, case management and disability management. Most nurses hold a credential in occupational health nursing. Upon successful completion of the program and passing the examination set by the college or university, a credential in occupational health nursing and or occupational health and safety is awarded.

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